Vietnam Generation

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It is a small brick house, one of a number of small houses lined up side by side on pint-sized plots. The address is 14 Ranger Road, in a suburban town in New Jersey. In the untended yard, trampled grass shoots struggle for life and scrubby bushes grow along the roadway. Tattered windowboxes poke out from the house sprouting, in place of petunias or geraniums, glass fragments, pieces of rope, fallen leaves and old tools.

In the backyard there is a garden. It alone is well tended. Special Asian vegetables thrive. Around it is a conglomerate of clutter. An old chair teeters near a large tree. From the tree a makeshift exercise apparatus made of ropes and wooden rungs swings. Bits of bicycles, pieces of cars, a tired shoe, and swatches of old clothes are scrambled together like a careless mosaic.

I park my car on the narrow street, nudging it close to the bushes to allow room for traffic to pass. Every yard on the block is clipped and trimmed except this one. There are at least two cars or trucks parked in each narrow driveway, and sometimes another at the curb. At 14 Ranger Road there are five cars—mine will make six. Three are squeezed into the inadequate driveway. Two more are nose-to-tail at the curb resembling an elephant line, and my Toyota butts up to the last auto like the last tail holder.

I feel uncomfortable walking to the door. The neighbors are surely not pleased about the condition of this property. They must wonder what business I have here. And I can't help but wonder about the occupants. I knock and hear harsh, staccato voices spitting words at each other. There is a scurrying, shuffling sound, and the door opens.

"Hello," I say, "My name is Janet Chambers. I am the new English tutor." The family gathers about, greeting me with almost imperceptible nods. With gentle deference they beckon me into the room, clearing the way, and indicating that I should be seated on a worn couch.

The room is small, the bare floor is stained with greasy spots and scratches. On a shelf, high in one corner, sits a smiling Buddha honored with a display of fresh fruit, shiny red apples, golden pears and bright orange tangerines.

Two sagging couches line two walls, and a shabby cupboard of sorts leans on a third one. Above one couch, an oriental calendar is hung by a nail, and a picture of a beautiful Asian woman is centered above the cupboard.

Strains of haunting music are coming from somewhere upstairs.

Aromatic scents waft into the room from the nearby kitchen.

A tiny girl darts about, her black eyes gleaming like raisins, her dark, lank hair flying about her wizened little face. She bounces, jumps and scrambles about among the group, hopping onto laps and snuggling into arms. "What is your name," I asked. "Dyeeng," is the sound to my American ears. D-u-y-e-n, they explain is the spelling: "It means lovely in Vietnamese." "You are lovely," I told her. She grins impishly clambering onto my knee.

Five other Asian faces, alike with their black hair, dark eyes and warm brown skin, cluster about me, two females and three males. They look at me with questioning eyes. In later discussions they will tell me how strange it is for them in this new country to see people with so many different colors of skin, hair and eyes.

Dong told me once, "So mixed up, the people, everybody different. Some so funny, orange hair, green eyes, white skins with speckles, and black people with blue eyes! So funny." It is easy to understand their surprise at such a polyglot of nationalities and races when they are accustomed to a single race and culture.

The older boy, Sau, begins speaking very carefully in an effort to pronounce the English words correctly. He tells me about the family.

Muoi, his aunt, is the mother of the little girl and the head of the household based on seniority. Sau, Muoi, Duyen, and Hung, a younger cousin, arrived in the United States a year earlier, in 1983. His brother and sister, Dong and Nam, just arrived a few days ago; and it is these two for whom I am to be the English tutor.

Not knowing quite how to begin, I attempt to communicate. I ask questions. "How old are you Dong?" He frowns and squints his eyes in confused concentration. "Unh?" He does not understand. Sau answers for him. "In this country he is about fourteen."

"When did you arrive here?" I ask Nam. She lowers her eyes, smiles shyly and whispers to Sau in Vietnamese. Neither Dong nor Nam can understand anything that I am saying.

"Have they had any lessons in English?" I ask Sau. "Yes, yes," he assures me. "In the camp...they have English in the camp."

"What camp?" I asked.

"The refugee camp."

"Where was that?"

"Singapore. You know? Malaysia, Singapore?"

I have heard the names of these places, but I have no idea where Singapore is. "Oh, Singapore, how long were they there?" There is a discussion in Vietnamese—hard, strident, brusque sounds. They decide—and Sau explains that they were in the camp for about two years.

That was the first of many exchanges between the Nguyen family and me. A one-line announcement in the church bulletin at a local Catholic church had caught my eye: "Needed, English tutor for Indochinese family." It was exactly the kind of commitment I was looking

for. My telephone call was answered by a cheerful man who referred me to a teacher, a woman who was responsible for finding volunteers to be English tutors. I was one of several.

As I worked more closely with Dong and Nam I began to learn from them about their native land and their culture.

Nam—so pretty with those high cheek bones and doe eyes cast down, in gentle timidity. The sponsor group encouraged her to go to English classes. She went to some. When I asked her how they were she told me she couldn't learn there because of the variety of people who all spoke with different accents. None of them were Vietnamese.

Just going to the class location in Hackensack was frightening to her. She had to take a bus and the very act of getting out of the house, waiting for the bus and boarding it along with strangers terrified her. She worried that she might get off at the wrong stop, or that she would get lost. She was afraid to speak since her English was practically nonexistent, and she was painfully uncomfortable in this strange new environment. She desperately wished she was back home in "my country."

Nam wanted to learn enough English to qualify her to get a job and send money home. All of her countrymen who come to the United States consider it a duty to send money home. Everyone in Vietnam is poor, they tell me. Sau explained that a man works all day for what is equivalent to fifty cents a day in American money.

In her home culture, Nam was not expected to become a wage earner. She was brought up to be a proper Vietnamese woman—modest, submissive, and gentle. Her family was comparatively well off in Saigon. The Nguyens were considered well-to-do by most of their countrymen. They had servants to do the cleaning and laundry. Now, with just two women in the house, Nam is expected to cook, clean and do laundry for the entire household.

Since Muoi has a job and Nam does not, she is expected to carry the burden of the housework. The men will help with laundry, but they refuse to do any cleaning or cooking. As Dong told me, "In my country, a man not do these things, it make him a little man—no dignity."

Another complication is the natural grouping of Vietnamese refugees. Many visitors, mostly men, are constantly coming and going in this Vietnamese household. They play dominoes and cards, drink beer, smoke and joke. Often, some of them stay over, a hospitable custom. This makes more work for the two women with no help from the men. When I asked Muoi why she didn't ask them not to come so often or stay so long, she said, "Oh, cannot do that. It is my duty, must take care each other, Vietnamese."

Finally, partly to escape this dilemma, Nam chose to marry a young Vietnamese man who had been coaxing her to marry him since her arrival. "At first, I no like him," she explained to me. "I have bigger idea of who I want. but then, I think, I need somebody take care me. I cannot do for self and I not able do work here."

Slowly we begin the learning process—the struggle to make the English words comprehensible. Pictures, gestures, mime, searching for communication. Words repeated—airplane, bowl, cat, door, egg, food—charades help us to translate our meanings to each other. Now and then their eyes light up with recognition and we struggle in awkward conversation to gain understanding. We talk about foods, what are bowls, and how Americans treasure pets. (Vietnamese think the American devotion to cats and dogs is funny and foolish.)

Even gestures are understood differently. The waggling motion with a forefinger that we use to indicate "come here" means, to a Vietnamese, "go away."

The personal story of their flight from their war torn country began to evolve:

Dong is a fourteen-year-old boy who left his country at the age of twelve. Nam, his twenty-eight-year-old sister accompanied him. Saigon had been their home. They got a boat to Malaysia. That was extremely difficult because "everybody wanted to leave after the Americans went away." The South Vietnamese knew that when the Communists took over they would have much trouble.

For Dong and Nam it took eight tries before they got on a boat. Each time, arrangements were made and money paid. Each time, they waited in the woods, squatting in the often wet, warm dark. They heard animals moving and grunting in the darkness, and watched the moon wend its way across the night sky and disappear behind the trees. They were tense and fearful as they huddled miserably, waiting and waiting, and when no one came, stumbling home. Again and again they went through this painful process. It has been said that the Vietnamese are willing to do things the hard way when the hard way is the only way possible. If hiding and waiting in the woods, over and over again, was the only way to accomplish their purpose and find their way onto a boat away from Vietnam, then that was what they must do.

Dong had been "mainstreamed" into the local New Jersey high school. The only special assistance offered by the school was the English as a Second Language class. I asked him about it. He looked at me uncomfortably and said, "It okay." Later he explained that he thought it was "silly, not worthwhile, she talk about funny things—not make sense." But he didn't want to tell anyone what he thought because he didn't want to get the teacher in trouble. Another Vietnamese characteristic, so different from the American code of "forthrightness," is that they tell you what they think will please you rather than make you uncomfortable with what they really think.

"In my country," Dong told me, "I go to school. I very smart. I learn quick. Here, I have much trouble."

I asked him to tell me about school in his country. "Oh, have much respect for teacher—not like here. We do exactly what teacher tell. Must memorize oh so much, a lot, I do it good pages and pages. No one

ever ask teacher question, very respectful. Teacher important person. I not understand here. No respect.

"In math I very good. Always get right. But I trouble here—not understand." Even with his good math ability, he was having trouble because of his lack of English. Another major problem for Dong was his discomfort in asking questions. He would not do it. Not only did he think it impolite, but he was also embarrassed because his English was so bad that he did not want to call attention to his inadequacy. I suggested that he talk to the teacher after class. "That okay," he assured me, "many students have question for teacher after class, I just tell you."

And the differences in how people in the community dealt with each other was baffling to them. "Ms. Chambers, why people hide in houses? In my country, everybody outside, smile, friendly, talk, visit each other. Here everybody stay by self, why?

"Ms. Chambers, I try help lady, she fall off bicycle, she jump up and holler me. In my country, is polite to help somebody, especially older person. Why she angry me?"

Hard questions for me to answer, but I try. "Here we have the idea that we can stay young longer. Maybe she didn't want to feel old, and resented you making her feel older. It is still the right thing to do, Dong. Most people would be grateful."

We discussed other differences. Why didn't Americans take care of the older people in their homes? Why didn't I have children? Why were teenagers so openly sexual and immodest about their bodies? Why didn't the students have more respect for the teachers?

Dong got very excited about one of the English assignments. He was to write a story and illustrate it. He had the story all put together in his head and he showed me the drawings he was making. "See Ms. Chamber, it is a story about a little fish. He swims with his family." And he told me just how it should be, that the little fish went off by himself to explore near the shore. He swam closer and closer to the bank to see what was there when suddenly a huge bird swept down and nearly caught him. Terrified, he raced back to the safety of his family in the middle of the little pond. "The moral of the story," Dong explained, "is that a child should stay near home until he knows enough about the world to take care of himself because others might destroy him." It was a sound and understandable moral.

Dong spent hours working on the drawings. The little fish was shown swimming with a school of fish. A large ugly bird with cruel eyes and a knife-like beak was portrayed striding along the bank peering hungrily into the pond. "It's good, Dong, really good," I told him. "I'm sure the teacher will be pleased with your work."

The following week when I came to tutor, I asked him how it went. He made a long face and rolled his eyes. "Don't know," he said. "What do you mean?" I asked him. "Oh, she say not mine—she say I not do work, must be somebody do for me."

I was furious. "What do you mean? did she give you a grade?" "She say it good, but not believe I do it, so she say I get a 'C.' That okay." I didn't agree, "But Dong, it isn't okay, you wrote the story and you did the work. It was very good. All I did was help you with the grammar. You should get the credit for it. You should tell her that. Do you want me to call her?" "No, no, that okay, not matter."

After that Dong didn't get excited about his classes. Often when I came, he looked exhausted and he had a harsh, ugly cough. I asked him about it. "Don't know why," he would tell me, "Hurts—head hurts too. Can't think right. Worry in head what happens. All night, sit, think and try know what to do." He would slap his head, "Can't do good, can't think right, can't make head go good. What you think?"

I knew he was in despair. He said he liked to swim. In my country, oh so beautiful, always beach and ocean and water, can swim anytime. Where can swim here?" We went to the YMCA in Hackensack. The membership cost was $50 a year for him, and he talked a Vietnamese friend into joining with him. "How I get here Ms. Chambers?" he asked. "Well, you can take a bus, or have someone drive you, or ride your bicycle," I told him. It was difficult because the family members were all too occupied with jobs and schedules to drive him, and biking on the busy suburban roads was treacherous.

He tried, but the first time the two boys went, they were scolded for a rule infraction which they had not understood—swimming during lap time. He had also eagerly anticipated playing ping-pong. But that was restricted, too. It was required that there be an adult with him and he had no one who could accompany him. Then his friend decided to get the money back and forget it. Dong didn't go very often after that. The swimming venture didn't work out very well.

He also rejected high school sports activities. He scorned football, baseball and track. "I know karate," he would say proudly. "I do that all time. I getting good." He desperately wanted to buy a "stretching" apparatus to grow taller. We found them advertised. You hang upside down by your feet. He had read this exercise would stretch the spine and make the user taller. Unfortunately, the outfit offering the item had gone out of business. So he and his friends constructed their own body stretcher in the back yard. Every time I came to the house he would ask, "What you think, Ms. Chambers, I taller? What you think?" He remained a solid 5'2" despite his efforts.

Dong also loves music. He bought a guitar and one of his friends taught him to play. Sometimes when I came he would play and sing romantic Vietnamese songs for me. He had a strong, deep voice and sang the haunting music soulfully. "Vietnamese music very deep," he told me. "Much meaning, very sad—young man loves girl and is longing to see her. Much heart in songs. You like?" Yes Dong, I like.

Dong did graduate from high school, but he can still barely read and write English. He can speak English, but not always understandably,

and he has had several different jobs: dishwasher at a local Chinese restaurant ("Very bad job Ms. Chambers, hot, sweaty, not good"); assistant in a print shop ("It okay, long time work every day, hard, not pay good"); and, clean-up person in a hospital ("They pay $6.50 an hour and if I good, maybe will pay more"). He will manage, but his prospects for satisfying work are poor.

His sister and her husband have a baby boy. The baby has a Vietnamese name, but his mother calls him by his American name, John. "So when he go school, he have name they know, not difficult, you know?" Nam explained. She calls me Grandma for the baby, since her parents remain in Vietnam and she may never see them again.

Dong speaks often of Vietnam. "Someday I go back to my country," he tells me. "You come, too, you come, I show you. Very beautiful. Will you come with me, see Vietnam, my country?" Maybe I will.